

LEON KOLB; NORTH HOLLYWOOD, CA; 8-17-03

Joined Navy June 12, 1936. Went aboard in June, 1937. Served on USS Texas before that. Ship vibrated so bad he thought it was an earthquake, when shaft sheered. Pudget Sound, i.e., Elliot Bay, making run between Seattle and Tacoma after an overhaul. Foggy morning. Lookout on bow should have reported over the phone to bridge. Ran into a tow line where a tug was towing a barge with a freight train on it. Barge went down. "Battleship Runs into Freight Train" appeared as headline in newspapers. Leon was in the first division at that time. Does not recall that Captain Foy had just come aboard.

Last time out at sea on maneuvers on darkened ship prior to attack. Got dark at 7:30 or 8:00. He was in the washroom. PA said all hands man your collision station. Collision around frame 90 (he thinks). They had been having drills all day long. Then PA said belay that, make it frame further aft. Near collision with Enterprise.

Collision with Arizona. Leon said that the bow of the Oklahoma hit the Arizona right where her garbage box hung out. Ended up with Arizona garbage on Okie's bow. Rammer bow was damaged badly enough to where they had to go into dry dock and they'd only been out for a couple months.

Dec. 7. Stood security watches in port. Put two gunners mates with unloaded rifles to parade around the living quarters below decks. Looking for saboteurs. Thought someone might break a lock on a powder magazine and put a bomb in there with a timer.

Leon was down in the No. 1 turret. Lockers and bunks were down in the gun turret. He'd already been up for breakfast, then came back down into the turret. Standing on a circle deck. When first torpedo hit he said he felt the ship raise. Felt it was an awful explosion. Thought a powder magazine aft had exploded. After third explosion the OOD came over the PA. Said all hands man your battle stations. He did not say man your AA stations. Remembers the no shit! Some of them in the turret, the gunners mates, had stations supplementing the crews on the AA guns. That's where Leon would have gone. They had drilled there. Leon thought if the enemy is attacking, and it's not through the air, he thought maybe some German pocket battleships had slipped in during the night and was shelling them. In that event he had to get the main guns ready to fire. Centering pin that keeps the turret from swinging around in a rough sea. His job was to pull it as soon as the OOD said to make ready. Get pins, holding locks that keeps the guns from recoiling when you fire them, that's to keep them from sliding back too if you loose the air pressure that holds them up in battery.

He was down below his battle station when attack began. Gun turret is equivalent to a five-story building. Lockers were down one deck from the powder magazine and shell storage. It was deck right up above the lower handling room where the powder coming out from the magazines would be put in the hoist to go up to the gun room. Bill Silva, Gunner's mate 1st class that was in charge

Leon received post card at ammo depot. Parents divorced. Leon sent it to his mother. She relayed it to his father in Oklahoma City. Leon guessed his mother contacted Lucille.

Leon's brother was in the Coast Guard. He was on temporary duty in the Post office building. He came over on Ford Island on the 8th looking for Leon. Got so sick looking under tarps at the bodies that he stopped. Leon found his brother months later when he returned from sea. At ammo depot for one week when he was assigned to a destroyer. No communication. USS Bolce. That was the first time his brother knew he was alive.

Turret captain of turret 1 came up to depot to give them postcards. Just check off boxes. He probably told people in Pearl who was at depot. Told to report aboard the Bolce 363 for duty.

Leon was the gun captain of the center gun of turret 1. It was his job to open the breech, throw the loading tray in, and the rammer man would ram the projectile in. All three guns were in a single compartment. Powder came up on each side of the three guns, each side would pass the powder to the center gun after the shell had been rammed, until they had four bags of powder shoved in. While the breech was open a primer man would stick a primer in, like a 30-caliber cartridge without a bullet in it. It would go through the stem of the mushroom which set off the black powder which set off the smokeless powder. As soon as the gun is fired, it comes back to loading position, the gun captain opens the breech and the gas ejection system which is a high pressure air system would blow out any embers from the silk powder to be sure the chamber was clear before putting any more powder in. Leon would close the breech. Had a gun captain, like Leon, a cradle man, a powder man, a rammer man, a pointer, a trainer.

Guns could not operate individually.

Bill Ingram was in the turret officer's booth. Separate compartment from the gun room. They had a porthole they could look through plus they had telephone communication with all the gun stations plus communication with main fire control and the gunnery officer.

Leon thought there were 40+/- men in the turret. They did not have a war-time complement. Leon's four years were up in 1940. Didn't think he had enough money so he signed up for two more years.

Did not remove firing locks for the inspection. They did store all their primers away and lock them up.

On Friday preceding the attack, Leon was sent ashore as member of the shore patrol. Put two of them together on each bad corner in Honolulu. Leon was with some guy from another ship. Had a corner right across the street from a big bar. Big fight broke out at 8 or 9 o'clock. All they had were billy clubs. They went over and ordered everybody out of the bar. Said the shore patrol was coming. They scattered. Bartender hollering that they were breaking his place up. 40 or 50 drunken sailors and Marines off different ships were fighting each other. Didn't even have a whistle. Doesn't really remember where he was on Saturday. He thinks he probably went to the movie on the afterdeck..

Anything that had to do with guns was part of the deck force.

Paravane. Torpedo-shaped with wings. Bring a cable back from each side of the bow hooked to the paravane, also a hauling-in cable. The paravanes would go out to make a vee of cable. They were used for mines. Mines would strike cable, then move alongside the cable to the paravane where a cutter was located. Mine cables would be cut by the paravane.

Leon didn't know if paravanes were used during the war.

5"/25s were used in the event of a surface submarine attack.. 5"/38 s were used in the event of a destroyer attack. He was on watch week prior to the attack. Did some duty on the 5/25s. If they saw a periscope they were to load a shell into the 5/25 tray so that it would be ready to ram and report to the OOD. He was on the forward 5/25 on starboard side (#1). No friendly subs in the area. Leon didn't see a periscope but one of the other gun crews did. Next thing he knew they were headed out of the area as quickly as possible.

It was a huge shock to Leon when he saw a Jap plane.

1st Division Living compartments were above the armored deck..

Junior Division officer and the talker, named Ward, stayed down below. Ward was holding a lantern. Junior division officer had phones on, hoping he would get communication. Watson and one other fella that was not part of the turret crew. Watson was part of the turret crew. These were the four that were killed in turret 1.

Roster was due June 30 and December 31st. Every Friday night 15-20 people would get off, and another 15-20 would come aboard.

Started bringing reserves in a year before Pearl Harbor. They came aboard for one year of active duty. When the year neared its end the reserves were informed that the Navy would be holding them longer.

Okey had a few Asiatic sailors. They were trying to break-up the clicks they had in the Asiatic Fleet. If you volunteered for the Asiatic fleet you could retire after sixteen years as compared to twenty years somewhere else. Didn't know if Okey was the only ship to receive Asiatic sailors. He thought if they were trying to break up the clicks that they would spread the sailors out.

Leon said the torpedoes were hitting before they sounded "man your battle stations!"

First thing that Leon felt was unnatural, was that the ship shook a little. Sometimes an armored hatch could get out of adjustment, and they would fall. That's what he initially thought had happened. Someone else said it might have been an earthquake. He surmised later that the shaking could have been the result of another ship being hit, or bombs dropping on Ford Island.

There was a model of the Oklahoma at boot camp. Someone said that it would take three torpedoes hitting in the same location to sink the Okey.

after the ensign, who was really in charge but didn't get out in time. Leon said he got the Medal of Honor for staying down there and holding a lantern for another fellow. Leon told Bill, before I get to my battle station should I help you set Zed. Close certain vents and open certain vents for battle conditions. Silva told him to go on up above, that he could handle it down here. This was after the fifth torpedo. Leon was counting torpedoes while hanging on to a bar that was used to hang towels and things. Old alarm clock hanging on a string. He was watching it. Moving like a pendulum. Counting five then six. First three hits were simultaneous. He had to get his cot out of the way. Waiting for the chief to come and the main division officer, Bill Ingram. Neither one ever got there. Ran into Ingram on Ford Island and his uniform was spotless. He was an All-American football player at the Naval Academy. Wild Bill Ingram. Father was an Admiral.

Back in September/October of 1941, they put a belt around the ship that was supposed to protect them from magnetic mines. Degaussing cable? Tested it between Long Beach and San Diego.

He credits Bill Silva for saving his life. He thinks only four sailors in the 1st division were lost. Bill Silva didn't make it. Went up above to get his bunk out of the way and then came back down. Then he went up a second time. Old iron ladders like you would see on the side of an old building. Like fire escapes. Silva told him to go on up to his guns station. By then the ship was listing so much and he asked the fellows coming in from the deck what was going on. It took around forty men to man the turret and only about fifteen of them lived down there. The only answer he got was that the enemy was coming around Diamond Head and was attacking them. Leon figured it was a ship shelling them. He figured they were going to have to fire over the Maryland to hit them. Decide to go take a look for himself. Ship was turning and sinking. Heard a story later that a seaman on Maryland was bragging that he had saved the Maryland by cutting through the hawsers with a fire ax. Ship may have stayed up a few more minutes if he hadn't done it. George Ross told him the story. Probably five hawsers secured the Okie to the Maryland. Guy probably got two forward and one abreast. The two remaining snapped on their own accord. Most torpedoes hit from center to forward. Most of the weight in water was forward. Paul said some guys were going hand over hand on the forward hawsers. Guy was midway across when the Maryland guy cut the ropes. When Leon went out on deck, the ropes were parted. Pictures show the hawsers draping over the Okie, so they had to have been severed on the Maryland side. Anyway an officer's boat that was tied up to one of the Okie hawsers was just there adrift by itself. Leon swam to it with two or three other guys. Guys were pouring over the side onto the blister ledge.

Leon thought they got Bill Silva's body on the 8th so he must have gotten out of the turret.

When Leon first got out on the deck, a Jap plane that dropped something that caused a huge explosion, he thinks it was the West Virginia, strafed him. There was a ping-ping-ping on the barbet of turret 2.

Officer's booth is in the overhang of the turret. Underneath the overhang is an armored hatch. Leon was engaged to Lucille. Had six months to go on six months to get out. Left his engagement ring in his locker. Had only purchased it a couple weeks before in Honolulu. It was hidden in a soapbox in his locker. It had cost him everything he had saved for five and a half years, outside of two hundred dollars. Recalled bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed because it became too evil. Lott's wife when leaving the city was told not to turn back. She did to think about her jewelry and turned into a pillar of salt. There was an artist's rendition of a woman made of salt. Leon decided not to go down because of the story. Leon really didn't think the Okie could sink because the water was too shallow. Never had occurred to him that it might capsize. He wanted to get to Ford Island to get a machine-gun from

planes to fight back. He heard that two fellas from his division were climbing up a rope on the Maryland and were strafed. One was hit by a machine-gun bullet.

Leon did not recall a lot of strafing. Leon watched the high level bombers come over. He said the bursts from the projectiles were going off about halfway up. He saw one plane drop a bomb on the Pennsylvania. Hung around with Ed Dishman on Ford Island. Couple more with them from the turret. Decided to go to the other side of Ford Island by the old cruisers. Were told to go into some barracks.

Leon tried to pull himself up over the bow of the officer's boat. Couldn't get up. Somebody helped him in the boat. 2nd Class petty officer was in the boat, Okie officer's boat. He asked the guy if he knew how to run the boat. Guy said yes, it was his boat.

Leon dropped into the water. Had heard that divers had to take three showers with green soap because the water was so polluted. Only about six inches of change between high and low tide so you don't get the change of water that you get in some harbors.

Boat went right by the Neosho. Went ashore between the Neosho and the California. Waded in. Walked along where they had some houses. Some guy came to the door. Covered with fule oil. Called them in and gave them kerosene and rags to clean themselves with. Left his white shorts and t-shirt there. Guy gave him khaki pants. Looking back Leon feels that it was a stupid thing to do because if the Japs were strafing officers, he didn't need to be wearing khaki.

He could see the Oklahoma right before it went on down. He thought that the California was going to capsize too.

The next day they called for gunners mates to volunteer to go to Lualualei ammo depot to load ammunition. Leon was anxious to go. Got some clean dungarees. Handled ammo day and night for ships that had been out with the carriers. About 9:00 on night of the 7th they opened fire on planes that had come in with their lights on. Leon saw the wreckage.

Leon slept on the floor of some barracks that night.

Paul said he saw the remains of one of the planes the next day. One plane had landed right after another. The second plane went right into the first. Its prop chewed into the first plane all the way up to the cockpit. The pilots armored seat stopped it.

Leon didn't feel he had a chance at Pearl Harbor. He said it was just a matter of fate.

Spent the day milling around the island. Lots of rumors. A couple thousand sailors, at least, roaming around Ford Island. Around the mess hall, around the laundry. Anarchy, nobody was in charge of anybody. Everybody was so scared, they didn't want to get involved in anything.

Hot a good breakfast that morning. Leon didn't even think about food the rest of the day. Never saw the Okie again that day. For all he knew only one boatload escaped from the Okie. Leon never heard the order to abandon ship.

Leon heard that a lot of the guys in the after turrets were mangled by 14-inch projectiles breaking loose.

Lucille heard that Leon was alive after about 30 days she thought.

LEON KOLB, WARRANT GUNNER Pearl Harbor

At the age of 23, Leon Kolb was a gunner's mate, second class, aboard the *USS Oklahoma* when the attacks on Pearl Harbor began. Three torpedoes almost simultaneously hit the *Oklahoma* before the announcement came over the PA that they were under attack.

When recalling Pearl Harbor, Kolb says the first thing that comes to his mind is what a terrible surprise it was. "The enemy is attacking. Man your stations." Kolb recounts. He remembers thinking, "What enemy? I thought it was German U boats." The thought of Japan attacking had never occurred to anyone. He often thinks of his buddies that were on the lower decks when the torpedoes hit the ship. "They never knew what happened," he says.

Leon Kolb's station was near the deck of the *Oklahoma*. He stepped out to ask what was happening just in time to see a Japanese pilot pulling out of a dive. "He came so close to the deck that I could see his face," Kolb recalls.

Seconds later, he heard something hitting the metal around him, but thought it was just shrapnel from the bombings of the nearby *USS Maryland* and *West Virginia*. He later learned that it was machine gun bullets piercing the deck right where he had been standing. "The Zeros were dropping bombs, going into dives, and shooting at the decks as they swooped down and pulled up."

Ultimately, the *USS Oklahoma* was totally lost after capsizing and sinking in the harbor, the result of five or more torpedo hits. While the *Oklahoma* was rolling, many sailors were killed as Japanese planes strafed the ship as they tried to scramble from the oily deck onto the *USS Maryland*. Over the next three days, over 30 sailors were rescued from the *Oklahoma's* sunken hull. Four hundred fifteen men died on the *Oklahoma*, but only 35 of them were ever identified.

Kolb escaped because of a small boat tied between the *Oklahoma* and the *Maryland*. "As our ship began to roll, the ropes tying us to the *Maryland* and the smaller boat broke. We swam to that boat and trolled between the two ships picking up other survivors. We spent the rest of the day and night on Fort Island."

When Leon Kolb thinks back on his life, he thinks about all that the guys in the lower decks missed. "I've had the opportunity for a long, happy life, a family, grandchildren and great grandchildren. I think about how lucky I am to have escaped without injury and to have lived so long," he said. "If I knew I would have lasted this long, I would have taken better care of myself!"

Kolb had a long career in the service. He spent over 10 years in the Navy before joining the Reserve, ultimately leaving the service as a Warrant Gunner.

Leon Kolb served with the Los Angeles Fire Department for 26 years before retiring in 1974. He and his lovely wife Lucille have two children, three grandchildren and six great grandchildren as well as a three year old great-great granddaughter. They live in North Hollywood, California.

Leon's recount of the attacks on Pearl Harbor has been featured in [Newsweek](#) and on the [History Channel](#).